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A 'dread' night brings peace through reggae

Two weeks ago, thousands of reggae music fans met in Jamaica for the biggest concert yet devoted to the music of the island. The Gazette's Juan Rodriguez reports in a personal diary.

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
of The Gazette

KINGSTON, JAMAICA — It's been five hours of non-stop reggae music here at the National Stadium, and there's four hours still to go of the 'peace concert' they've named 'One Love.'

The Jamaican head of state, Michael Manley, a near-white man wearing a white safari outfit, has been ushered to a seat near the stage, amidst a barrage of international cameramen.

Jacob Miller, a large blubbery rastaman, is grinding and swivelling his pelvis in exaggerated sexual contortions as Manley arrives.

The concert is to commemorate the 12th anniversary of the visit to Jamaica of the late King Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, whom the Rastafarians consider God. The event is designed to bring all Jamaicans together in 'one love' to stop the antagonism and warring amongst various gangs.

All around the stadium and its 30,000 inhabitants are posters with self-help slogans:

"Unite, Sacrifice, Produce."
"Work Together For Self-Reliance."
"Build Jamaica With Discipline."

In this Woodstock of Jamaica, Jacob Miller goes into a high jumping, wild romp across the stage, slipping, landing on his rump, gets up staggered but quickly enough to seem as if it's all part of the act.

Everybody is waiting for the headliner, the internationally renowned Bob Marley and the Wailers, in their first Jamaican show in years — Marley himself was almost assassinated in his Kingston home two years ago — but Miller is sweatily going through his routine as if he were the star.

"I'm a dread, I'm a dread..." he wails, (a synonym for Rastafarian).

Someone in his band hands him a cigar-sized spliff of ganja (marijuana), the sacrament of the Rastafarian cult, which is illegal, as it is in most countries on the globe.

Don't wander

He takes a deep draw and blows the smoke across the stage. He takes another, eyes closed in euphoria, as his band steps up the metronomic but crazy beat. Miller sticks out his stomach and jiggles it, then makes a mad dash and jumps off the seven-foot stage, grabs a helmet from one of several dozen policeman, dances back up stage, dons the helmet and takes a triumphant toke on his spliff.

The previous evening, while the imported American sound and lighting crew were setting up what was to become Jamaica's biggest musical extravaganza, and musicians and technicians were "racking their brains out" (as the Jamaican Daily News' music reporter Selim put it) at last minute details, there was a reception for the klatch of foreign journalists at the harbour-front not-quite-completed Intercontinental Hotel. We are warned not to wander far from here after 4:00 p.m. (when the stores close), as the infamous Trenchtown area is nearby.

Celebrities are here. Mick Jagger is cloistered in his room getting his head together, and his Rolling Stone guitarist Ron Wood is nearby. Keith Richard, rock's biggest reggae fan, cannot get into the country because of his Canadian heroin bust. Carly Simon is here to take in the event.

The big cult

Reggae. With its mellow beat and its odd hybrid of pop clichés, has been the ultimate 'cult' music for white fans for years. The music is both spiritual and sensual, performed by musicians who gear up by smoking ganja.

A good proportion of the visiting journalists also seem smashed, in their cut-off jeans, hockey sweaters, panama hats, and T-shirts. They express apprehensive fears about the concert. Will there be trouble at the stadium? Only a week before three people died in food riots in Kingston. Would some ganja-crazed rasta take a potshot at Marley?

I had other concerns. Could I endure nine hours of reggae music — much of which I find monotonous, like that of a skipping phonograph needle?

There are only two reggae albums that I enjoy from start to finish: Marley's 'Natty Dread' and the soundtrack from the excellent Jimmy Cliff film, 'The Harder they Come,' which defines the reggae operandi. The attempt at escaping poverty through music, mixed with ganja and violence along the way.

At least 30 single records are released in Jamaica per week. The competition for radio airplay is fierce, resulting in many kinds of reggae music, encompassing weird, exotic, and sometimes fascinating assimilations of other types of music.

Reggae is not in cut and dried as American soul disco music — whatever works is good. This competition has resulted in perhaps the world's liveliest 'regional' record market. So vibrant is the record business, in fact, that many Jamaicans consider it an export commodity.

But another view is reflected by Borgo Snuffy, in Rasta Voice magazine:

"Musicians are aware that they get a raw deal from producers but the majority continue to sing out of pure love for the music ... It is time that some members of society face up to the reality of the situation. Roots music must be accorded international respect and recognition ...

"The music is born out of the blood, sweat and tears of a people with clear religious and cultural identity — the Rastafarians. It is this uniqueness of the music that makes it distinct from all other types of music."

Meanwhile, all over Kingston there are posters depicting the Rastafarian God, Haile Selassie, saluting an audience at the Stadium. He is haloed by the names of some of the performing groups, headlined by Marley (courtesy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) and Peter Tosh, who left the Wailers when Marley decided to put his name up front.

There were three price ranges for the concert — Peace Section: $8, Love section: $5 and Togetherness Section: $2.

Goats and guns

Outside the National Stadium — opened, a plaque informs, by Princess Margaret in 1962 — there are goats, army men holding onto machine guns, and vendors selling everything from corn on the cob, patties, watermelon, hand-made one-love T-shirts and buttons, posters with words of wisdom from Selassie and the thoughts of Chairman Mao.

Hard-core Rastas are on the scene, including one guy whose dread locks — that twisted, coiled hair — were resplendent, surrounded by a straw-top hat and a three piece wool suit.

Inside the stadium, another Rasta sells posters and discs of Marley's latest disc 'Kaya' (another word for ganja), producing upon request rolled spliffs from a fig top box of Marlboros.

The show commences, surprisingly, right on the stroke of five p.m.

Many of the 30,000 spectators have not arrived yet, despite the fact that the gates were supposed to close at 5 p.m.

The parade of reggae talent is staggering — at least 16 acts in all — the first half backed up by Lloyd Parkes and the group We the People, performing in front of a backdrop that depicts verdant rolling hills arched by a red, yellow and green rainbow (rasta colors) and topped by a gold neo-cubist lion's head with a crown — yah, God.

Big Youth is introduced as "the true poet of Jamaican music, but because of our copyright laws he cannot collect a penny from his Number One hits in Britain."

But — with his stoned variant of Black Panther rhetoric: poetry ("Every nigger is a star, a bright and shining star"... "When I get my inspiration, I have my means of communication") Big Youth is a major bust. Dressed in a kaftan that looks like a shower curtain, wearing rings and a gold watch, he's the first performer to elicit cries of 'Get off!' from the audience.

The band has to cut him off at one point, before he winds into an excruciatingly long version of 'Old Man River', and then, unmercifully, a reworking of the Ray Charles hit of 20 years ago.

While the American stage crew efficiently sets up the equipment for the larger groups, Prince Edwards, a comic with a propensity to lewd jokes, dressed in a flaming pink suit, entertains while, out amongst press row, the Archbishop of the Church of Ethiopia, in here to shake hands with Prime Minister Manley.

It's the fifth hour. All the ganja has been smoked, and the audience is in a most somnambulent mood — quiet, non-applauding. But even though rotund Jacob Miller's antics fail to get much of a rise from the crowd, we're confident that at least Peter Tosh and Bob Marley will be greeted with chants and cheers.

It's quiet now

But this doesn't happen. Tosh, the most overtly-revolutionary act, is accorded nary a whisper, despite scorching political incantations and some very heavy 'progressive' reggae.

Tonight he wears a beret over dread locks and a black army-safari suit. When taking guitar solos he struts across the stage in mesmerizing style. During one long solo, in which each member of the band including a kinky synthesizer player) goes into discordant but logical improvisations, Tosh's sound is reminiscent of the sort of funky avant-garde jar made by Miles Davis of late.

He's theatrical. In one solo, someone dressed as a colonial in a pithe helmet is shot down by a musician who wields his guitar as a gun.

Everyone's falling out for peace, sings Tosh. "But I don't want no peace until there's equal rights ... Despite my fame, I happen to be one of the underprivileged," he says, launching into his rap, pointing at Manley. He talks about ganja and how it is the only thing Jamaica has going for it — both to get poverty-stricken natives by and as an export to tourists — and that hassling the poor for smoking and selling it is plain unfair.

Tosh's incendiary performance roused hardly a flicker from the crowd but arch rival Marley does not have to follow him. Instead, there is Ras Michael and the Sons of Negus, eliciting six percussionists.

It's Marley's turn

Finally, it's "the moment we've all been waiting for," the return of Bob Marley to the Jamaican stage.

Despite the wilting crowd, Marley is in top form, dancing his jig-like highstep, his throat hoarse but trying. When he announces that it was so nice to be playing in Jamaica once again — after all these years abroad — he receives no response. But the animosity that had built up from Marley's absence from Jamaica has died down from the stoned, fatigued audience.

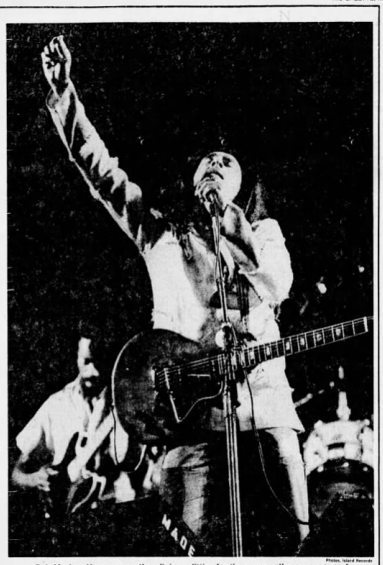
He does not sing many of his big hits, sticking mainly to religious-inspired ditties and saving a new hit, 'One Love,' for the end, when he invites Michael Manley and opposition leader 'Eddie' Seaga (a Caucasian) to join him in ritual arm-clasping. Manley appears cool and collected while Seaga seems somewhat shellshocked, as Marley dances between them in frenzied steps.

Soon it is over. Marley still exuberant, but the audience exhausted (many amongst the grandstand had left before the show was over). For Marley, it is an auspicious start to a Jamaican tour that will be followed by a North American jaunt (including an appearence here at the Forum on June 8th).

For Jamaicans, it was a successful, if overly-long show. Successful because of the lack of violence and because of the great showcase of reggae music talent (indeed, Chris Blackwell, the guru-president of Island Records, main entrepreneur of reggae music, was keen to sign up 18-year-old Junior Tucker after the show).

For the foreign journalists, there was no doubting that reggae was for real, whether one liked it or not; it is probably the strongest 'regional' music in the Western Hemisphere. But whether it catches on among North American blacks remains to be seen.

Still, one cannot go to Jamaica without feeling the spirit of reggae. On the way from Montego Bay to the beach resort of Negril, our taxi driver stopped by at a shanty shack, picked up some ganja and Red Stripe beer (a pride of the country) and plugged in his cassette tapes of reggae music: Ah, Jamaica!



Bob Marley: He sang mostly religious ditties for the mammoth peace concert

Photo, Island Records

Superstar rock singer Mick Jagger talks with Jamaican security men prior to concert

TUNED IN

By Thomas Schnurmacher

Evil 'Dorf' to perform at nightclub

Actor Michael Moriarty whom you may remember as the evil captain Dorf in the NBC special event 'Holocaust' has his own nightclub act as a singer.

Moriarty opens May 29 at La Nuit en Rose on Guy Street.

Other acts coming up at La Nuit en Rose will include Marcia Lewis, Goth am, Joanne Summers and Lesley Gore.

Lilian Wylie who has been TV press officer at the CBC for 18 years retires June 30. Ms. Wylie will then divide her time between Pointe Claire and Florida. I wonder where she'll spend the winter. Lots of luck, Lilian.

Some of the New York locations being used for the **Belle Midler** film 'The Rose' include a major midtown hotel, a downtown police station, the Brooklyn Bridge and a local bathhouse. Bette should feel right at home. She got her start at the Continental Baths (now Plato's Retreat) in the Big Apple. Her co-star in the film is **Alan Bates.**

Noted Canadian choreographer **Brian Macdonald** is choreographing five numbers for Candida, a witty musical realization of the Voltaire masterpiece for the Stratford Festival. Music is by **Leonard Bernstein.** Macdonald by the way celebrates his 50th birthday later this month.

Joan Peters, Barbra Streisand's boyfriend and ex-hairburner, is producing a film that will be a contemporary version of Clare Booth Luce's 'The Women.' The original version of the film produced in 1939 was directed by George Cukor and starred Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, Rosalind Russell and Joan Fontaine.

Also in the cast of the film version of the Broadway stage hit was **Paulette Goddard, Marjori Main,** and the **grand-mammy** of all the gossipmongers — Hedda Hopper, bless her heart.

The Robert Stigwood Organization which is cleaning up with the unprecedented success of 'Saturday Night Fever' movie and soundtrack, is producing another film entitled 'Moment by Moment' starring **John Travolta** and **Lily Tomlin.**

The winner from Montreal in the Du Maurier Search for Talent was classical pianist **Nicole Pressentey,** aged 19.

Colombia Pictures has come up with a great promotion gimmick for 'If Ever I See You Again' — Joe Brook's film about long lost lovers. You dial the toll-free number 800-425-5250 between noon and 9 p.m. daily, leave your name and the name of the person you're looking for, and the city you knew them in.

The catch is, that the computer can only match people who are looking for each other.

Two items on **Gabe Kaplan** of 'Welcome Back, Kotter' fame. First of all, Kaplan is so envious of the phenomenal rise to superstardom of his "pupil" John Travolta that he does not even stop to say hello to Travolta when the two of them are in the same restaurant together. Travolta was asked what he thought about that and replied 'Gabe Who?'

Kaplan is now leading an American national public service campaign urging the public to recycle aluminum beverage cans. Depots have been set up that pay 17 cents a pound for the stuff. No wonder he's jealous.

Rooms at the newly opened MGM Grand Hotel in Reno, Nevada range from $35 single to $250 a day for the solarium suites that come complete with Roman bath and his and her bathrooms. The hotel contains no less than 2,000 slot machines in addition to gaming tables for blackjack, roulette and baccarat.

Israel won the Eurovision song contest with an entry called 'A-Ba-Ni-Bi.' Jordan cut off the telecast from Paris at the very moment that Israel won and switched to a series of commercials. They then focussed on a still-life of purple flowers until the Israeli entry was over.

Robert Altman is a man who definitely does not like the press. When Gene Siskel, film critic for the 'Chicago Tribune' said some negative comments about Altman and his latest film, 'The Wedding,' Altman allegedly had Siskel barred from the movie opening. That's all very well, Mr. Altman, but how are you going to keep him out on the second night of the third night...

• Thomas Schnurmacher is heard on CJAD radio on Sunday at midnight.

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